

A Wee Puppet Will Teach Them

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The transformation from infant to toddler takes place in an instant (or so it seems to parents). The cooing and dribbling baby suddenly starts trying to climb the dresser to reach a favorite toy.

Early childhood is the most important developmental stage of a child's life, and parents are naturally eager to use all the educational tools available—videos, for instance. And yet many of the highly touted videos really are no more than out-of-context shots of toys to covet and animals in motion strung together against a backdrop of the majestic sound of Mozart reduced to a music-box tinkle.

Other videos seem to be designed to drill the alphabet into the brain of a being who is just beginning to grasp what language is. The former will immobilize a small child while producing the vacant, slack-jawed look of an early couch potato; the latter will be received either with consternation or total lack of interest.

Thanks to the vision and persistence of Stephen Gass, a part-time resident of New Milford and Don Burton, there is an alternative: "eebee's adventures," a new series of DVDs that will have parent and child actively engaged together, learning by playing and laughing while learning.

Eebee is a colorful, infant-like puppet with gentle eyes and a pert nose, who serves as a model for transforming simple everyday play such as the rolling of a ball into something constructive, instructive and fun. And eebee (the duo insist that the puppet remain gender ambiguous so that children can decide what or who their new playmate is) was born because its creators noted a severe lack in the field of children's video—nothing was reaching out to support and encourage children's innate curiosity.

The name, eebee, a diminutive of "every baby," was chosen because the pre-verbal set can say it. And, eebee is native of Litchfield County by virtue of the fact of having been built and operated by New Preston-based puppet artists Bob Fappiano and Lisa Buckley.

The puppet is the size of a 9-month-old and coos and gurgles much like a child that age. "It was really important for us that unlike other characters that are designed for infants, we were really building an infant," Mr. Gass stated.

"Everybody was working on skills that kids weren't ready for," Mr. Gass explained. "The preschool agenda was being force-fed at infancy ... and we know from both our backgrounds that it was about building the foundation for future learning. We knew, for example, that when a baby is tearing a piece of wrapping paper, that's early division ... when a baby is rolling a ball or trying to move something along, that is playing in the physics lab."

So, instead of expending energy worrying about why a child has not yet mastered the alphabet, you and your child could be romping around on the floor while learning about basic skills like building and taking apart or filling and emptying. These are things that kids actually do. When your child is dumping things out of the laundry basket or tugging on the nearby curtain to see what will happen, he or she is fulfilling that old adage, "play is the toddler's work" except that via "eebee's adventures," it can become part of their education too. It is learning by doing.

"Eebee's adventures" also demonstrates how to build on the examples of play provided by the DVDs. For example, as Mr. Burton explained "there are all these variations on simple ball playing, which every parent does with a child, but now we are showing the creative range of all the variation that really challenges the babies in different ways," Mr. Gass concurred, adding, "That is what 'eebee's adventures' were designed to do. To move from the screen to the floor."

The idea is at once simple and yet completely innovative in terms of the educational video market for children: Creating "adventures" based on children's actual natural behaviors. Take that notion of rolling a ball. By introducing another kind of ball or by

sliding the ball down a ramp or through a tube, you are engaging a child's curiosity and teaching that child to stick to a task, in this case, seeing what will happen with the ball. Other adventures involve playing with light and shadow as well as making music with pots, bowls and spoons. How were these adventures chosen? Again, by actually watching what kids do. "We spent months on the floor with babies," Mr. Gass explained, "playing, seeing what was interesting to them."

Through the types of explorations offered on the video, children "get all of these intuitive understandings [which] create the foundations for future learning," Mr. Burton noted. "If you are trying to hijack them all the way to preschool and academic readiness ... you are really missing all those explorations that really give them the fodder by which to think more abstractly."

Parents may be interested to know that this video uses original music with a heavy beat meant to underscore the action and make a child want to bounce along. This music, composed by Michael Sweet and members of an organization called Audiobrain and featuring lyrics by Mr. Gass, should not grate on parents' nerves if they have to hear it 2,000 times—they might actually bounce along too.

For the past three years eebee has been the central focus in the lives of its creators, each seasoned innovators in the child media industry. Between them, Mr. Burton and Mr. Gass have worked for the most important names in the children's education and entertainment fields including Sesame Workshop, Disney and Nickelodeon. Aside from bringing their own considerable experience to the project, the duo also brought in academics from prestigious institutions such as Harvard University, Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania to contribute their expertise in child development to the development of "eebee's adventures."

Admittedly slightly cynical, this reporter applied a little research of her



Above, eebee in repose in New Milford. Bottom, the puppet has some fun with its co-creators Don Burton, left, and Stephen Gass.

own and tested out an eebee DVD on her favorite rambunctious 16-month-old Elmo addict. At first the normally non-stop toddler just moved to the music, rocking back and forth to the beat. But soon, carefully watching the puppet play with balls of various sizes, she began to point at the screen, saying "ball, ball" and "baby ball." We then began as much of a discussion as a recently verbal child and a harried mother can have about a ball at 5 a.m. And when the DVD ended, an actual ball was repeatedly requested, suggesting that the toddler was in fact inspired by what she had seen. A joyful half-hour ensued as we rolled the ball between us and bounced it off different surfaces, curious to see what would happen.

As of Aug. 23, many more children will have the chance to experience eebee. That's the date that Sony Wonder will release the first three adventures: "Exploring Real Stuff," "All in a Day's

Play" and "Figuring Things Out." These DVDs, which are listed at \$14.98 each, will then be available via www.sonywonder.com, www.amazon.com and eebee's own Web site, www.eebee.com, which was set to go live Aug. 11 at midnight.

For Mr. Burton and Mr. Gass, the launch of the videos is about much more than selling DVDs. The release of "eebee's adventures" is about getting their message out to parents and children. "We're evangelists for the power of playing and all the rich learning that goes on through that," explained Mr. Burton. "And it is more fun for a parent. Why grill your child on ABCs and 1,2,3s when you can get on the floor and play with them and the learning is so much more rich." Instead of a way to preoccupy your child, "eebee's adventures" offers a way to occupy you together in discovery and fun.

